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ABSTRACT

Proponents of writing across the curriculum are quick to clarify that writing to learn is not the same as learning to write; but as flip sides of a single coin, the two support one another. Across-the-curriculum writing finds its merit in removing students from their passivity. Cross-curricular writing activities fall into two groups--expressive writing and product writing. Proponents of writing-across-the-curriculum agree that when teachers incorporate writing in their content areas, the need for review and the need for reteaching after testing is sufficiently reduced to more than make up for the difference in the amount of instructional time required. While hard statistical evidence that writing-across-the-curriculum improves student performance is scarce, a few studies show positive results. To overcome the problems of implementing a writing-across-the-curriculum program, most school districts have found a year-long plan for inservice education and group dialogue necessary. When content area teachers incorporate writing in all areas of the curriculum, students benefit in three ways: (1) they have a resource for better understanding content; (2) they practice a technique which aids retention; and (3) they begin to write better. (RS)

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Digest

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Encouraging Writing Achievement: Writing across the Curriculum

by Sharon Sorenson

Proponents of writing across the curriculum are quick to clarify that writing to learn is not the same as learning to write; but as flip sides of a single coin, the two support one another. Anne Walker (1988) calls the two parts the "virtuous circle." When content area teachers incorporate writing in all areas of the curriculum—social studies, math, science, vocational education, business, foreign language, music, art, physical education, and language arts—students benefit in three ways: they have a resource for better understanding content; they practice a technique which aids retention; and they begin to write better. (Walker, 1988; Kurfiss, 1985)

How Does Writing Across the Curriculum Help Students?

Across-the-curriculum writing finds its merit in removing students from their passivity. Active learners are active thinkers, and one cannot write without thinking. (Steffens, 1988; Walker, 1988) Thus, incorporating writing-across-the-curriculum techniques tends to change the complexion of the classroom. Teacher-centered classrooms become student centered. Rather than the teacher being the Great Dispenser of Knowledge, filling students' empty heads, the teacher becomes a facilitator, aiding students' understanding. (Self, 1989; Hamilton-Wieler, 1989) Assuming that students gain new knowledge by making associations with prior knowledge, the writing activities commonly used across the curriculum give students the opportunity to make those connections. (Walker, 1988; Self, 1989; Barr and Healy, 1988; Kurfiss, 1985; Steffens, 1988) With the hectic pace of back-to-back 50-minute classes all day, students need the chance to assimilate information, make connections, and face whatever may still confuse them. Hamilton-Wieler (1988) calls this kind of writing "a way into or means of learning, a way into understanding through articulating."

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What Kinds of Writing Make Sense Across the Curriculum?

Many writing-across-the-curriculum assignments tend to differ from typical English-class writing assignments (unless the English teacher also incorporates writing-to-learn techniques). Generally, cross-curricular writing activities fall into two groups:

- Expressive writing appears in learning logs, journals, exit summaries, problem analyses, or peer dialogues, and allows the student to write in his/her own vocabulary without fear of being "corrected."
- Product writing appears in more formal products—essays, test question responses, library papers, and lab reports—most like what students have been taught to create in English class.

Given the difficulty of product writing and given the usual initial discomfort of content area teachers in giving and evaluating product writing assignments, models prove useful. Models that illustrate how to tailor a topic to a specific curricular area help students learn how to address purpose in terms of audience. Models that illustrate discipline-specific language help students learn how to prepare a more focused, deeper response. (Sorenson, 1989; Winchester, 1987; Hamilton-Wieler, 1988)

How Can Teachers Find Time for Writing?

The biggest stumbling block for teachers is their concern for precious class time and how they can cover the book or meet curriculum requirements if they add yet another component to classroom instruction. Generally, proponents agree that when teachers incorporate writing in their content areas, the need for review and the need for reteaching after testing is sufficiently reduced to more than make up the difference. And since expressive writing should never be graded—especially not for grammar or mechanics—teachers do not suffer from increased paper load. (Worsley and Mayer, 1989; High-tshue, 1988; Self, 1989)

Does Writing Across the Curriculum Improve Student Performance?

While hard statistical evidence is scarce, a few studies show positive results. In one study, low-achieving math students using writing-to-learn techniques improved their state competency test results to a greater percentage than did average math students in a traditional classroom. (Gladstone, 1987) A physics teacher saw a steady 3-year improvement in overall grades when writing-to-learn techniques were incorporated. (Self, 1989) Other studies, admitting a lack of hard evidence, nevertheless found attitudinal shifts among students. (Winchester, 1987) Most students experienced less apprehension about writing and felt they were better writers—writing more varied, more complex, and more mature pieces—after only a year in a school-wide writing-across-the-curriculum project.

Most importantly, however, research supports that writing to learn improves higher-order reasoning skills. (Gere, 1985) As Barr and Healy (1988) summarize the research, a "study of writing achievement across the curriculum attests to the fact that writing improves higher-order reasoning abilities. WAC programs are ideally suited [to achieve these ends,] for they provide the theoretical base for teachers and the instructional strategies that enable students to reformulate ideas from text."

What Kind of Staff Development Has Been Successful?

Some school administrators say they have a writing-across-the-curriculum program "housed in the writing lab." Others say the program is evident in their school newspaper or literary magazine. Still others suggest that writing across the curriculum happens when the English teacher asks students to write a paper about art or the art teachers refer to literature. These examples lack the ingredients of writing across the curriculum. (Walker, 1988; Self, 1989)

When teachers from all content areas incorporate writing activities on a nearly daily basis in all classes, then writing-across-the-curriculum techniques are in place. In order for that to happen, however, teachers need a great deal of preparation. Most teachers outside the university feel uncomfortable as writers, even writing about their own curricular areas. They feel even less comfortable 'evaluating' writing. And some resentment almost always arises over "doing the English teacher's job." (Walker, 1988)

To overcome these problems and address the issues—in short, to make teachers comfortable—most school districts have found a year-long plan for inservice and group dialogue necessary for a successful program. In many cases, participation has been voluntary (Winchester, 1987; Self, 1989), but the rewards have come when participants, observing the enthusiasm and classroom success, have asked for information. In other cases, participation has been mandatory (Self, 1989), but there is some question about a teacher's success if he/she is an unwilling participant.

Barr and Healy (1988) argue that "Schools succeed when the emphasis, by both teachers and students, is on writing and thinking about relevant and significant ideas within the subject areas." Writing across the curriculum accepts writing,

the need to develop it, and its role in learning as a human function essential to thinking and communicating.

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